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Pragmatism without frills

Until Saturday the administration had been unsuccessful in explaining just what it is about Nicaragua that threatens our national security. Visitors to that decrepit country saw no military juggernaut that couldn't be taken care of by the Fire Island militia, nobody thinks Daniel Ortega should be renamed Alexander the Great, and so it was easy for Congress to hold its nose, roll its eyes, and abandon the "contras." That was before Saturday.

In a speech to the World Business Council, CIA Director William Casey put Nicaragua in perspective. No, in and of itself, the Sandinista regime is not going to lead the march on Washington. Until it can consolidate its own Marxist revolution, it might even curtail its support of anti-government guerrillas in El Salvador. But the important thing about Nicaragua is not what it is — a collection of *campesinos*, skinny chickens, and dust — but where it is. Nicaragua, Mr. Casey says, is a line camp for Soviet attempts to control the West's supply lines. A strand in the noose, if you will.

"Afghanistan, South Yemen, Ethiopia, as well as Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, and Mozambique and Angola in southern Africa, bring Soviet power astride the sea lanes which carry resources to America, Europe, and Japan," says Mr. Casey. The value of Nicaragua? As a mothership for terrorists and guerrilla groups, and perhaps later by using its muscular armed forces, it will go after the Panama Canal in the short term and

Mexico in "a somewhat longer term." The two primary targets of this global strategy are "the oil fields of the Middle East, which are the lifeline of the Western Alliance, and the isthmus between North and South America."

Here is pragmatism without the frills. Many people have dismissed the idea of creeping communism as a product of paranoid minds. "Democracy will win in the marketplace of ideas," is the common observation. It is true, of course, only if the marketplace is allowed to work, and in Nicaragua, the marketplace has been shut down.

The Communist victories Mr. Casey speaks of are not ideological; they are strategic. Nicaragua is only a small country, but it is in the right place at the right time. The danger Mr. Casey cites is not something he and his fellow spooks cooked up in a cauldron over at Langley. Any buck private knows the importance of supply lines. Beetle Bailey could have drawn the Soviet strategy in his sleep.

Mr. Casey has furnished the world a compelling analysis of the Sandinista aims and a good reason to fund the army of resistance, which he says will keep Mr. Ortega too busy to intervene elsewhere. At the moment, the majority of Democrats are more easily swayed by supposed executions than by reports such as this; and if they are to learn any better, President Reagan must start singing from the same sheet.